

A conversation with Denise Furlong: Creating welcoming spaces for newcomers

DENISE FURLONG AND DAVID MARTIN

Dr. Denise Furlong was the keynote speaker at the annual WAESOL Conference in October 2023. Dr. Furlong holds an Ed. D. in Literacy Education from Rutgers University with an emphasis on English learner education. She is currently an Assistant Professor and the Director of Advanced Studies for Reading Specialists & ESL at Georgian Court University in New Jersey. She has nearly 25 years of experience in teaching multilingual learners and coaching their teachers in a variety of K-12 educational settings. In addition to K-12, Dr. Furlong has also enjoyed the opportunity to work with adult English learners at the university level and within various community environments. Her book, *Voices of newcomers: Experiences of multilingual learners* (2021) was the 2023 recipient of Delta Kappa Gamma’s Educator Book Award.

During her WAESOL keynote presentation, she made a direct connection between her work with Newcomers and all multilingual learners and the conference theme—Sharing, Reflecting, and Expanding Our Practice. Her presentation set a positive tone of advocacy on behalf of our students regardless of the teaching context. Recently, Denise took time out of her busy schedule to share her experience and advice for *WAESOL Educator* with David Martin, outgoing WAESOL president.

David Martin: What led you to become a teacher?

Denise Furlong: Funny, this past week we’ve been talking at Georgian Court University about First Gen students and how most of the students we recruit do not have family members who are teachers. I can resonate with that. As a first gen student myself, I didn’t have any teacher role models in my family, so I don’t even know what brought me [to the point of wanting to be a teacher] other than a small [period of] time when I was a senior in high school, and I decided I was going to be a physical therapist, which is a form of teaching really. However, growing up I had always wanted to be a teacher, and what we talk about with recruitment is that so many times with teachers it’s like a contagious situation where one person in the family becomes a teacher and others want to follow. Many recruits might say that they have an aunt or a mother who’s a teacher, or their grandfather... That wasn’t the case for me as is the case for so many of those we seek to bring into teaching; however, I am really proud that I have a nephew who’s a teacher and another one who’s on his way, so maybe I started it being contagious in our family.



Denise Furlong with her award-winning *Voices of newcomers: Experiences of multilingual learners* at the 2023 WAESOL Conference

DM: How did you get your start working with Newcomers?

DF: When I first got my undergraduate degree, I was an elementary education major with a secondary major of Spanish, which you need in New Jersey [to get certified]. When I graduated, I was able to teach elementary school and then also I took a test to be K-12 Spanish certified, and I remember looking right away to go back to school. I was still living at home with my parents, and I remember looking at something that Rutgers was offering, and it was like their master's degree in language, and it had bilingual ESL. I said to my mother "Wow, it's like I wrote what I wanted, and they have that in these classes," so I got my ESL degree along with my master's degree. That is kind of where my path took me and then I followed this path to a different district where I started teaching in middle school. That was really when I first met students who were Newcomers. Again, I was still a kid but now I was a teacher kid. However, it was then that I started to kind of consider how [newcomers] have different needs and how they must be feeling when they're here and they just want people to understand them and their experiences. Ultimately, that really drew me in.

DM: What has been the most impactful experience you have had as a teacher of Newcomers or multilingual learners?

DF: So I can think of so many, and that's what I think we experience as teachers of multilingual learners. Currently, I have come back to working in a high school, and I am constantly just blown away by the motivation that my multilingual learners have. I am humbled by the things that they've gone through. Before this experience, I had only known a handful of unaccompanied minors, but in the past few years [it has become much more prevalent]. I have students showing up, and they don't have their parents next to them. Needless to say, there might be some uncertainty in their lives, so when I think about what is impactful, I think about the everyday impact that the students have on our world and their worlds. I could probably choose twenty things, but you know as a teacher you have to think, "What are they going through each day?"

DM: In your book, you pose questions to teachers asking them to compare their own experience as learners to what they see happening in their own classrooms. How might you answer that question and what is your advice to new teachers in the ML classroom whose students are struggling?

DF: So as a younger student I was very shy and would not ever raise my hand. If a teacher called on me, I answered in a whisper because I just did not want the spotlight shone on me. Remembering my experience kind of gives me empathy for the feelings of our multilingual learners where they really sometimes don't want to have the spotlight on them whether it's in their heritage language or in English. Sometimes they

want to kind of fade into the background. Therefore, I feel it is important to set up your classroom or your educational setting in the way that helps people feel comfortable; therefore, if they make a mistake, it's no big deal. In this type of classroom, they are willing to take risks. I think this applies to our littles all the way up to our adult learners. After all, I think we all feel that way to one extent or another; we don't want to take a risk and put ourselves out there if it's going to be embarrassing. I think about developing an inclusive environment a lot, especially for our learners who might be in the silent period and might just need to work in a small group or need time to write down their thoughts first or to draw.

DM: You mentioned in the Keynote presentation how happy you were that the language used to speak about multilingual learners is changing. What do you feel is the most important lesson we can learn from the shifts in the language used to refer to our multilingual students?

DF: So I know a lot of times people are like "Oh, they're changing the names of everything; first they were this and now they're that." However, I really think it is a big deal. I think that when we refer to things through a positive lens, it really affects how we look at the students. Since we are moving towards more states officially calling these students multilingual learners, we're kind of saying that there is more than just English that they're learning. They are leveraging all these languages, and they are learning content. Therefore, I think it is important that we are shifting from an English-centric view and really empowering them. It's the same thing that happened when we used to call newcomers port of entry students, you know. You're focusing on one time in their lives rather than acknowledging them and saying "Hey, you're here. We're happy you're here and let's learn alongside you!" I think it's really a big deal and represents a shift in mindset that goes along with our shift in language that I think is so important.

DM: Could you speak to your own experience a bit more as a language learner? What parallels do you see between your experience and those of your students?

DF: Sure! So my second language is Spanish and I had the privilege of learning Spanish as a second language in a predominantly English-speaking area. I learned Spanish beginning in high school, and then I went on to study it in the university setting and then in my position as a teacher. What I consider important was that when my motivation was at its peak to learn and after I passed all the certification tests, it was when I had to communicate with the families of my students that I started to kind of embrace the language and the culture. This lesson applies when we talk about motivation to learn the language, and that's what we talk about when our students really see authentic uses for language and how learning this language is going to be beneficial. For me, it was not just about saying "Oh, I'm going to learn

it so I pass this test or I get this certification” but more like “I’m going to learn it so I could really authentically be part of my students’ lives and their families’ lives and become an advocate.” So, probably the advocacy is really what helped me move along in my journey because it was a challenge as a non-native speaker. In the end, once I was able to apply the language and learn authentic language, that was so much more powerful.

DM: How can teachers of multilingual students best advocate for their students?

DF: Start small, advocating at the state level, advocating in teams where you are speaking up and saying these are

ways that these decision makers need to be really considering the diverse needs of our multilingual learners, whether they are language learners or adult learners or everybody in between. Something else to consider is that sometimes the most difficult advocacy you undertake is in the same hallway as your classroom. Sometimes our own colleagues might be the ones that fight us the most. However, acknowledging that is your first step and then you can take it from there. Mostly, though, empowering ourselves to act on our students’ behalf is crucial, keeping in mind that we’re not anyone else’s voices but sometimes we’re in a position where we can amplify the voices and experiences of our students.

REFERENCES

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